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Fort Augusta

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Fort Augusta, Sunbury, Northum



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Fort Augusta

Sunbury, Northumberland County

FRONTIER STRONGHOLD OF
PENNSYLVANIA

Built 1756

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Fort Augusta

PENNSYLVANIA'S stronghold in the upper Susquehanna Valley, from the days of the French and Indian War to the close of the American Revolution, was Fort Augusta, whose site is now within the limits of the city of Sunbury, in an area which the Indians called "Shamokin." It was first constructed as part of the British defense against the raids of the French and Indians from the upper Allegheny region. Later, as an American fortress, it was used to aid in the protection of the settlers of the upper Susquehanna from the savage allies of Britain.

The construction of this fort in the wilderness, near the former Indian village of Shamokin, where the Susquehanna divides into North and West Branches, was a British reply to the French advance into the Allegheny Valley. In 1753 and 1754 the French had built forts at important points in Western Pennsylvania, with the hope of strengthening the link between Canada and Louisiana and confining the British Colonies to the land between the Appalachians and the sea. Raiding parties of French and Indians followed the trails over the mountains to lay waste the frontier settlements of Pennsylvania, as in October 1755 when a band of Indians massacred the white settlers at Penn's Creek, six miles from Shamokin.

Several important wilderness travelways met near Fort Augusta. The river and its branches made canoe travel easy to north, west, and south. From the headwaters of the West Branch near Emporium there was a portage of only twenty miles to the headwaters of the Allegheny River near Port Allegany, or Canoe Place. A network of trails led in all directions. The Shamokin Trail, the Iroquois Warriors' Path, and the Kittanning Trail were alternate routes by which destruction might come upon the Pennsylvania frontier settlements, or by which a vengeful band of frontiersmen might strike a counter-blow. Fort Augusta was thus in a key position for both defense and attack.

The Indians of the Six Nations saw the necessity of an English fort at Shamokin to protect them and the English from French aggression. As early as January 17, 1756, at a council in Carlisle, they told Governor Morris, "As we cannot tell how far our enemy [Onontio's Children] may incline to enter their claim to the lands in these parts, we desire you would immediately take possession & build a fort at Shamokin, lest they, who are cunning, designing people, should take possession before and prevent you, and we desire you would place some proper person to live always there to manage Indian affairs."

The Governor, after considerable delay in securing legal authorization, dispatched Colo-

nel William Clapham with a regiment of four hundred men to secure this important point. Colonel Clapham first built Fort Halifax at the mouth of Armstrong's Creek, in Dauphin county, as a base for supplies. He then pushed on to Shamokin, which he reached in July 1756, and began to erect Fort Augusta. By the time winter came, the fort was in condition to resist attack, though its additional fortifications were not completed until the following year, under the direction of Colonel James Burd.

Fort Augusta was about two hundred feet square. Built of logs which were upright in the part facing the river, and lengthwise in the rear, the main wall of the fort was faced or "revetted" to about half its height by a bank of earth, and further strengthened by a dry ditch or moat. The triangular bastion in each corner permitted a crossfire that covered the entire extent of the wall. The main structure of the fort enclosed officers' and soldiers' quarters, a magazine and a well, the last two of which are still preserved. The fort was further protected by an outer stockade, which was flanked by four blockhouses, two on each side. These blockhouses in turn were connected by a stockade, forming a "covered way" to the river. The fort is said to have mounted sixteen cannon, of which two are still preserved in the Museum.

During the campaign of 1758 Fort Augusta

helped to protect the rear of the long English line of communications—the Forbes' Road across the Allegheny mountains—whose successful completion compelled the French to abandon Fort Duquesne.

Fort Augusta, however, never was forced to endure a siege. Its strength and position were such that attack was discouraged. The chief objective of the French lay farther west in the struggle for the control of the upper Ohio valley, where the later developments of the war in Pennsylvania took place. By its very existence it limited the effectiveness of French raids and threatened French power in northwestern Pennsylvania; it held the Susquehanna Valley for Britain.

Fort Augusta was not attacked during the Indian uprising of 1763, even though in that year a party of Seneca warriors, talking with Sir William Johnson, "Pointed out the Forts Pitt and Augusta as the greatest Eye Sores to the Indians in them parts." Because of the troubles in the west, reinforcements and supplies were sent to the fort. Once more its defenses and its position discouraged attack.

The peaceful development of the territory around Fort Augusta began during the years following. The Proprietors made the Purchase of 1768 from the Indians, and surveyed their Manor of Pomfret about Fort Augusta. Land was given to officers of Bouquet's expedition of 1764 against the Ohio Indians, as a

reward for their services. In 1772 Northumberland County was formed, and Sunbury was laid out near Fort Augusta as the County Seat. The first County Courts met at the fort, and the magazine was used as the first jail.

During the War of the Revolution Fort Augusta was the military headquarters of the American forces in the upper Susquehanna Valley. The activities of the Northumberland county militia, the sending of troops to serve in Washington's army, and the support and protection of smaller posts throughout the valley, were all directed from the fort, where Colonel Samuel Hunter, the County Lieutenant of Northumberland county, resided.

The Iroquois allies of the British invaded this territory frequently. Hunters and settlers were tomahawked, and in 1778, after the massacre at Wyoming, the settlers fled in what became known as the "Great Runaway" to Fort Augusta. An expedition under Colonel Hartley was sent into the area to restore order; it advanced up the North Branch of the Susquehanna, and destroyed the Indian village of Tioga, in Bradford county. In 1779, after a recurrence of the Indian raids, and after the battle of Fort Freeland, the second Runaway took place. This was followed by another expedition against the Iroquois, under the leadership of General John Sullivan. Fort Augusta was a base for sup-

plies and men for this important campaign of the Revolution. As many as a thousand men were assembled here at one time. Sullivan's expedition, by destroying Iroquois villages and cornfields, broke the power of Britain's Indian allies. But for this campaign the British proposal of an Indian buffer state between the United States and Canada might have become part of the Treaty of Peace in 1783.

Fort Augusta gradually disintegrated during the following years. Colonel Samuel Hunter continued to reside in the Commander's Quarters of the fort, which had become his property, and his descendants continued to live there until 1852, when the log house burned. The present Hunter Mansion was built at that time by the Colonel's grandson, Captain Samuel Hunter.

In 1930 the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania purchased the land of which the well and magazine are located, and in 1931 acquired the larger tract which includes the Hunter Mansion. Together they form the Fort Augusta property, administered by the Pennsylvania Historical Commission as an historic shrine.

The Hunter Mansion is now a museum of the Pennsylvania Historical Commission. The collections of the Northumberland County Historical Society, with many interesting relics of Fort Augusta and early Sunbury, are on display. A local WPA project transcribed

many important documents. This small project has been succeeded by a regional office of the statewide Pennsylvania Historical Survey, which bids fair to make the Fort Augusta Museum a major depository of material on Pennsylvania history.

On the lawn in front of the mansion is a large-scale model of Fort Augusta, constructed as a WPA project. This model is undoubtedly correct in all its details, except that the flanking blockhouses and covered way were omitted for lack of space. By descending into the old magazine, into part of the structure of the old fort, and standing on the platform overlooking the model, it is easy to visualize the frontier fort of 1756, "the key of the province," and lone outpost of Britain in the wilderness of the upper Susquehanna Valley.

